

Diagrams in linguistic discourse: towards a visual rhetoric

Diagrams play a major part in the visualisation of scientific data, both in the humanities and the natural sciences: Tables, flow-charts, maps, tree-diagrams, graphs etc. are indispensable tools of scientific representation, tools that transform data into evidence by granting a general view of the available data, by highlighting connections or by indicating tendencies. Diagrams will also make concepts and entire theories “visible” and translate them into structures that can be grasped at a glance. In linguistics, diagrams are used to represent structures and processes at all levels of analysis, some types of diagrams have even been developed into specialised tools for specific linguistic sub-fields.

Despite their ubiquity and variety, studies of diagrams in linguistics are few and far between. It seems to be difficult to describe with precision what diagrams contribute to linguistic discourse and what language of description would be appropriate to map this contribution. A recent study of the history of diagrams in linguistics assumes that it is the interplay between two basic graphic and functional types, tree-diagrams and grids, that holds the key to the use of diagrams throughout the history of linguistics (see Roggenbuck 2005), where Stewart’s catalogue (1976) had posited three graphic types (trees, grids and box diagrams) and, in an attempt at form-function mapping, correlated each with a number of different potential functions. Neither study offers a theoretical foundation, either for the proposed taxonomy of diagrams or for ascribing specific functions to specific diagrams; but then, there is neither a generally accepted taxonomy of visual representations nor a generally accepted manual of visual rhetoric.

I will argue that a combination of both is needed for any kind of form-function mapping to be viable. In my presentation, I will propose a taxonomy based on Nelson Goodman’s general theory of symbols, which offers extensional descriptions of symbolic practices (see Goodman 1976 [1968]), and indicate how a semiotic basis could be of use for the exploration of the multiple uses of diagrams and their ways of interacting with the verbal and pictorial context they belong to – in other words for the description of their rhetorical functions. This does not necessarily imply an interpretation of diagrams as rhetorical figures in the very strict sense proposed by Fahnestock (2003), but a recognition of their rhetorical dimension, which would allow for an investigation into the cognitive rhetoric of diagrams.

Fahnestock, Jeanne (2003): Verbal and Visual Parallelism. In: *Written Communication* 20 / 2003, p. 123-152.

Goodman, Nelson (1976 [1968]): *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis etc.: Hackett Publishing Company.

Roggenbuck, Simone (2005): *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder. Arboreszenz und Raster in der interdisziplinären Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft*. Tübingen : Narr.

Stewart, Anne H. (1976): *Graphic Representation of Models in Linguistic Theory*. Bloomington etc.: Indiana University Press.